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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to identify key, recurring discourse activities and to develop hypotheses about ethnic or subgroup differences in discourse style that could lead to adverse educational outcomes. Data are drawn from ethnographic observation of 50 sharing time ("show and tell") sessions held in a first grade classroom. Different intonations and discourse styles used by white and black children during sharing time are described, as is the teacher's role in structuring discourse and providing an example of discourse she considered appropriate. The tendency of the teacher (a white middle class woman) to misunderstand or misinterpret black childrens' topic chaining discourse style is attributed to a culturally based mismatch between teacher's and child's prosodic signalling system and narrative schema. Such mismatches are said to have, over time, resulted in differential amounts of practice doing literate style accounting for black and white children in the class. It is predicted that, since sharing time is an activity that promotes the development of prose-like oral discourse, such differential treatment may ultimately affect these children's progress in learning to write topic centered, discursive prose. (Author/GC)

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# Sharing Time:
# An oral preparation for literacy

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Sharing time: an oral preparation for literacy

In learning to become literate in school, children have to learn to shift from their home-based conversational discourse strategies to the more written-like strategies of discursive prose. However, learning to make this transition to a literate style is not equally easy for all children. For one thing, some children come to school with discourse strategies that are closer to the literate standard of the school and hence have less to learn in acquiring a literate discourse style (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1976; Collins & Michaels, 1980). Furthermore, there is initial evidence suggesting that when the child's home-based oral discourse style is at variance with the teacher's own literate style and expectations, interaction between teacher and child is often asynchronous and marked by interruptions and misinterpretation of semantic intent. This child, over time, often does not gain access to the kind of instruction and practice required to develop a more literate oral style (Michaels & Cook-Gumperz, 1979).

The work I will report on comes out of a long-term ethnographic project in both school and home settings, in which I was the participant/observer in an intergrated, urban first grade classroom. One of the major difficulties with ethnographic research in classrooms is in translating from the necessarily holistic observations into material that lends itself to fine grained linguistic analysis. We attempt to solve this problem by using a case study approach oriented toward key situations. By this we mean that the goal of our ethnographic inquiry is the discovery of certain strategic encounters that mirror the progress of individuals through certain social institutions. Our notion of key situation, as developed in the work of Fred Erickson and John Gumperz, holds that modern life offers certain "gatekeeping" encounters which determine access to occupation, official redress and educational opportunities. Within such situations, group specific differences in discourse strategies or style assume great

importance because misunderstanding frequently results in denial of access to some social opportunity.

Educational settings are rich in such situations because individuals are called upon to verbally display some knowledge or proficiency at recurrent communicative tasks, and are then evaluated on the basis of this performance. These situations and communicative tasks must be discovered by detailed ethnographic observation, focusing on a segmentation of the classroom day and an analysis of the participant structures which characterize the various speech events throughout the day. This ethnographic work then suggests strategic sites whereby the interactional processes of successful or unsuccessful communication can be observed, recorded and contrastively analyzed, and then related to educational outcomes such as teacher evaluation or test scores.

On the basis of our early ethnographic work in the first grade classroom, sharing time (also called show and tell in some classrooms) appeared to be just such a key situation. It was a recurring classroom activity, where children were called upon to give a formal description of an object or narrative account about some past event. The teacher, through her questions and comments, tried to help the children focus and structure their discourse. This kind of activity thus served to bridge the gap between the oral discourse competence the child brought from home and the acquisition of literate discourse features required in written communication. As such, sharing time could be seen as a kind of oral preparation for literacy. However, there appeared to be evidence of differential treatment of children in that some sharing turns generated more successful teacher/child collaboration than others, and hence some children seemed to get more practice doing literate style accounting than did others.

On the basis of these early impressions and initial hypotheses, we began to systematically audio and videotape sharing episodes and do detailed conversational analysis of individual sharing turns. The data that I will report on are a representative sample of narrative accounts by the first graders, selected from over 50 sharing sessions during the course of the entire school year.

Ethnographic background

Sharing took place every morning in this particular first grade classroom within the context of a larger episode which we refer to as "rugtime," a time when the children assembled on the rug for various teacher-structured activities such as taking roll, doing the calendar, etc. During this time the children were expected to sit quietly on the rug, engaged in what Cook-Gumperz (1978) has called "attentive listening."

Sharing was a clearly bounded speech event, opened formulaically by the teacher whom we will call Mrs. Jones, saying "OK, who has something important (interesting, exciting, special, etc.) to share?" To get a turn, children raised their hands and waited to be nominated by the teacher, but while another child was sharing, anyone could call out short, topically relevant comments from the rug. The only explicit rules for sharing were, 1) no sharing about TV or movies because it takes too long, and 2) no sharing about private family matters, such as quarrels, etc. Very early on, children were urged to tell about events that had already taken place.

Once a child was called on, he or she went to the front of the rug and stood next to the teacher who was seated on a chair. The teacher was actively involved in each turn, holding her arm around each child as he or she talked, holding the floor for the child (e.g., "Excuse me, it's Merle's turn") and freely interjecting questions or reactions to the child or group at large.

That the children saw sharing-time as a completely unique speech event was evidenced by their use of a highly marked intonation contour. This "sharing intonation" was an integral feature of sharing discourse and occured in no other classroom speech activity (other than role-playing sharing as a part of "playing school"). In this particular classroom, which was half white and half Black children, we have identified two contrasting, but very comparable intonation patterns, both clearly identifying the talk as sharing-talk. The contour used primarily by the white children was a gradually rising contour, stretching over the last word or two of a tone group. The accompanying utterance was often a

syntactically complete, independent clause where an adult speaker would often use falling intonation. This particular curve seemed to indicate "more to come" and was almost always followed by a significant pause. This perhaps served to ward off comments from peers or teacher, allowing the child some extra time for planning. For example,

Ahab: I got this Chinese Checker's game ...
for my birthday ... and .....

The second intonation contour was used exclusively by the Black children and very pronouncedly by some of the Black girls. It occured in exactly the same environments (independent clauses), and could be characterized as a lilting high rise-mid fall contour, also generally followed by a pause. The contours were used primarily at the beginning of a turn (as the child introduced the topic), where perhaps more planning was required, or the talk most ritualized as sharing talk. For some children, especially for those who used the second contour, this sharing prosody involved rather sharp pitch modulations, giving the talk an almost sing-song quality. For example,

Sherry: October my mother gonna have her baby, ...
and I want it to be a girl ...

There was also evidence of the use of a lexical formula. In telling aobut past events, children very commonly began by saying:

Yesterday ... or Yesterday ...

depending on which intonation contour they generally used. That this was formulaic (rather than simply a function of the fact that children want to talk about the immediate past) could be seen in the cases where children corrected a false start. For example,

Bob: Yesterday ... I mean ... I mean .. when I went to Arkansas [which happened a year earlier].

Deena: Yesterday ... I mean it was last night ...

It turns out that using such a formula served several discourse purposes. First, it served to ground the talk temporally, the

importance of which was repeatedly emphasized in Mrs. Jones' comments. Secondly, it established a frame that helped the child in structuring, and the listeners in interpreting, the discourse as event or person-oriented "accounting."

The teacher's sharing schema

From our preliminary study of sharing turns, it became obvious that the child's discourse could not be analyzed in isolation. The teacher played a crucial role in structuring the child's discourse and providing an example of the kind and form of discourse that she considered appropriate. In analyzing Mrs. Jones' comments in response to the children, it was evident that she had an underlying schema of what constituted "good" sharing, and that this schema had an implicit literate bias. Mrs. Jones' schema for sharing, while having something in common with everyday notions of narrative structure, was far more restrictive. Her schema required that the story take the form of a simple statement and resolution centering on a single topic. Importance was attached, not to content per se, nor to the sequentially ordered structure of an account, but rather, as in simple descriptive prose, to clarity of topic statement and explication. What the teacher seemed to be looking for was a decontextualized approach to any topic, whereby:

1) objects were to be named and described, even when in plain sight;
2) talk was to be explicitly grounded temporally and physically;
3) discourse was to be tightly structured so as to highlight one particular topic (which then made it sound "important");
4) thematic ties needed to be lexicalized if topic shifts were to be seen as motivated and relevant.

The teacher's notion of sharing was thus far removed from everyday, conversationally embedded accounts which depend upon their situated character for much of the detail. In the teacher's

schema, this kind of detail had to be fully lexicalized and explicated. The teacher's expectation thus seemed to be shaped more by our adult notions of literate description, and was influenced perhaps by the need of the school experience to promote literacy.

Children's sharing style

I'll now turn to a more detailed analysis of the discourse style used by the children in doing sharing, in particular as it conformed to, or violated the teacher's underlying schema of what counted as appropriate and adequate sharing. Just as there was an identifiable difference in sharing intonation used by the Black and white children, we found corresponding differences in discourse style. The discourse of the white children tended to be tightly organized, centering on a single topic or series of closely related topics, a discourse style we have called "topic centered." For example,

Daniel: Last Christmas / my mom / she / I -- I was
telling my mom that I wanted stamp-pads /
and so at Christmas / I mean on my birthday /
she got a stamp pad and a stamp for me //
C: Oh / that's really neat //
T: OK, let's try it out //

In contrast to a topic centered style, the Black children, and particularly the Black girls, were far more likely to use a "topic-chaining" style, that is, loosely structured talk which moved fluidly from topic to topic, dealing primarily with accounts of personal relations. This style resembles that found by Scarborough in Black children's stories (personal communication). The topic chaining style was generally characterized by an absence of lexicalized-markers other than "and" between topics. While topic shifts were signalled prosodically, this kind of discourse was difficult to follow thematically, for those who, like the teacher, expected the narrative to focus on a single topic. These sharing turns gave the impression of having no beginning, middle or end, and hence no point at all. The result was that these

children seemed to "ramble on" about a series of commonplace occurences.

With children who used a topic-centered style, Mrs. Jones was highly successful at picking up on the child's topic and expanding on it through her questions and comments. The discourse of these children reflected a similar sharing schema, and the teacher was able to collaborate with them, in rhythmically synchronized interaction, and so build on their narrative intentions. Her questions generally stimulated more elaborated, focused talk on the same topic.

With many of the Black children, on the other hand, the teacher appeared to have difficulty discerning the topic of discourse and predicting where the talk was going. Her questions were often mis-timed, stopping the child mid-clause. Moreover, her questions were often thematically inappropriate and seemed to throw the child off balance, interrupting his or her train of thought. The child often reverted to simple one word responses (a block, uh huh, uh uh, yesterday) to the teacher's questions. In the cases where the child continued to talk, these turns were often cut short by the teacher, who jokingly referred to them as filibusters on occasion. It is important to stress here that we are not talking about isolated occurrences but rather well established patterns that characterized sharing time interaction over the entire course of the year. We are just beginning now to do quantitative analysis of sharing turns and it appears certain that the topic-centered/topic-chaining contrast will prove statistically significant.

There is clear evidence that Mrs. Jones was aware of the children who used a topic-chaining style, and that she saw this as a matter of planning at the level of discourse content -- that is, topic selection. When, in the role of ethnographer, I asked Mrs. Jones what she made of these turns, she explained that these kids didn't really know what they wanted to say in advance and were simply talking off the top of their heads, thinking up things to say as they went along. This is the same response we get when we play topic-chaining turns to other middle-class, literate informants who have had no prior experience with these children

or sharing time sessions.

Mrs. Jones was sincerely concerned about helping these children develop a more appropriate sharing style and developed two specific pedagogical strategies, one focusing on content, the other focusing on discourse form, to deal with topic-chaining. Very early on in the year, she began to emphasize regularly the notion of "importance," stating that appropriate topics for sharing were events that were "really, really very important ... and sort of different," that is, topics that would be of general interest.

In spite of Mrs. Jones' insistence on "importance," all the children had some difficulty with this notion. For example, early in the year a child raised his hand to share and when Mrs. Jones asked, "Is this very, very important because we don't have much time this morning," the child replied, "I don't know if it is or not but I want to say it." However, children who used a topic-chaining style appeared to have far more difficulty understanding what was meant by "important." In analyzing many of these turns, though, we see that it was not the topics of discourse themselves, that were inherently trivial or uninteresting, but rather that the rhetorical style used made it seem as if there was no topic whatsoever. The problem for these children was more one of discourse form than of content. In asking the children to tell about "important things," the teacher was tacitly assuming that the children understood how to do the actual telling in a literate style -- that is, telling about one thing only and in such a way that is sounded important. Simply reminding the children to talk about important events did not provide them with the criteria for either topic selection or discourse style.

Later on in the year, Mrs. Jones began to regularly invoke a new sharing principle, that being that the children should tell about only one thing. She explained that it was getting late in the year and they were pressed for time. While this rule of thumb was somewhat vague, it did provide a clearer characterization of her implicit schema than did her emphasis on importance. However, as the following example indicates, this strategy was also somewhat infelicitous in practice.

J: Deena / I want you to share some- one thing / that's very important // one / thing // from where you are // ... is that where you a:re // ... is that where you were //

D: no //

J: OK //

D: um // ... in the su:mme:r / ... I mean / ... w-when um / I go back to school / I come back to school / in Septe:mber / ... I'ma have a new coat / and I already got it // ... and / ... it's / ... u:m / ... (...) got a lot of bro:wn in it // ... a:nd / ... when- / um / and I got it ye:sterday / ... and when ... I saw it / my um .. my mother was .. was going some .. where / when my .. when I saw it / ... on the cou:ch / and I showed my si:ster / and I was readin' somethin' out on .. on the ba:g / and my bi:g sister said (...)

C: um close the door

D: my big sister said / Deena you have to keep that away / from Keisha / 'cause that's my baby sister / and I said no // ... and I said the plastic ba:g / ... because / ... um / ... when / ... u:m / .. sh-when the um .. she was u:m (with me) / wait a minute / ... my / cou:sin and her (...)

J: wait a minute // you stick with your coat now // I s-said you could tell one thing // ... that's fair //

D: this was about my c-

J: OK / alright / go on

D: this was-

D: and today / and yesterday when I .. got my coat / my cou:sin ran outsi:de / and he (..) ran to tried to get him / and he / he he start- / ... an' when he get in- when he got in my house / ... he layed on the floor / and I told him to get up because he was cry:in' //

J: mm-what's that have to do with your coat //

D: h-he ... becau- he wanted to go outside / but we .. couldn't // (exasperated)

J: why //

D: 'cau:se my mo:ther s-wanted us to stay in the house //

J: what does that have to do with your coat //

D: bec- um uh

C: (whispers)

D: because / .... I don't know //

J: OK // thank you very much Deena //

C's: (talking)

J: OK / do you understand what I was trying to do // Deena / I was trying to get her to stick with one / ... thing // and she was talking about her /

C's: coat //

J: new /

C's: coat //

J: coat // it sounds nice Deena //

In this example, Mrs. Jones begins with a clear prescription of what she wants from Deena, combining both strategies, with emphatic stress on "one thing." This is an indication of her firmly grounded expectation that Deena will launch into topic-chaining discourse. In line 6, Deena begins her turn, explaining that she has already gotten the new coat that she will be wearing when she returns to school in the fall. Her discourse is rhythmically chunked, and marked by vowel elongation and high-holding pitches, with no sharp intonational contours. From our analysis of Deen's other sharing turns and discourse in other settings, we can identify this as discourse that serves to orient or qualify a person-oriented narrative. In line 9, her discourse changes rhythmically and prosodically into typical narrative style, a style we have identified in informal home conversations between Deena and her mother as well as in peer/peer conversations outside the classroom. As she shifts into typical narrative style, there is a corresponding shift into narrative syntax as well. It appears that the early talk about her coat is but a preamble or descriptive aside, setting the scene so to speak for a narrative account. There is further evidence that the preamble is separate from her narrative in that Deena says, "yesterday" with marked sharing intonation in line 9. Yesterday, it happens, is a lexical and prosodic sharing formula, used by all the children. However this generally occurs only at the very <u>beginning</u> of a narrative account.

It appears that the teacher misses this transition to the narrative proper, seeing Deena's talk about the plastic bag and her sisters as peripheral and only loosely related to the topic of her new coat. But in line 18, when Deena begins to talk about her cousin, the teacher loses the thematic thread completely and interrupts her, telling her to stick with her original topic, her new coat. Deena's response in line 22, that the talk about her cousin is in fact related, suggests that she sees the discourse about her sisters <u>and</u> her cousin as connected in exactly the same way. Both relate to the coat in as much as they both happened yesterday, the day she got her coat. She

even tries to make this connection explicit when pressed, saying in line 25, "and yesterday when I got my coat, my cousin ran outside." However, Mrs. Jones is looking for a semantic, topical connection, not a narrative, temporal one. Mrs. Jones continues to press for an explicit semantic link until Deena gives up and sits down. It seems that Deena would have had to spell out for Mrs. Jones something like, "Yesterday, I got my new fall coat and now I'm going to tell you about a couple things that happened to me when I got it."

It is worth noting that this particular sharing turn occurred at the very end of the school year, after repeated occurrences of topic-chaining discourse and repeated attempts on Mrs. Jones' part to deal with them. It may well be that Deena's preamble about her coat was an attempt to accomodate to the teacher's demand. This kind of narrative preamble does not occur either in her early sharing turns or in her informal narrative accounts with family members or friends. However, the teacher was unable to follow the transition from preamble to narrative as it was not marked prosodically or lexically in a way that she could interpret and Deena's effort went unnoticed and unrewarded.

I do not mean to imply that Mrs. Jones was in any way at fault here, prejudiced or incompetent. She was to the contrary an excellent teacher, warm, highly skilled and loved by all the children. She furthermore was extremely effective with these children in terms of academic achievement, as shown by end of the year standardized test scores.

Interestingly enough, on one occasion, I, myself, in the role of participant, had to lead sharing time, and in spite of my heightened analytic awareness of topic-chaining strategies, I found myself unable, on the spot, to follow this kind of discourse thematically and ask appropriately focused questions. I simply let these children talk until they were finished and at one point I found myself saying to a child who used a topic-chaining style, "Just one more thing. We're running out of time."

There was also a Black instructional aide in this classroom,

who on one occasion as well, led sharing time. While the aide was in general a less skilled teacher of reading and math than Mrs. Jones, during the one sharing session she led, she was better able to pick up on these children's narrative intentions, ask them thematically appropriate questions, and help them round out and organize their narrative accounts.

The consistent problems that Mrs. Jones had with certain children during sharing time had to do, not with attitudes, but with automatic, unconscious processes at the level of discourse, stemming from a mismatch between teacher and child's prosodic signalling system and narrative schemata. Such mismatches over time, resulted in differential amounts of practice doing literate-style accounting for Black and white children in this class. In as much as sharing time is an activity that promotes the development of prose-like oral discourse, such differential treatment may ultimately affect these children's progress in learning to write topic-centered, discursive prose.

The processes we have studied in sharing time interaction appear to be systematic and general. We have found no counter-examples in our own data. Furthermore, as we begin to link this work to our ethnographic study of home and peer play settings, we are finding clear evidence that the topic-chaining narrative strategy derives from home-based narrative experience and expectations.

Our attempt in this study has been to identify key, recurring discourse activities in classrooms, and develop hypotheses about ethnic or sub-group differences in discourse style that over time, could lead to adverse educational outcomes. The primary effort at this stage has been to develop systematic, replicable ways of documenting such processes, using an <u>interpretive</u> approach that focuses on interaction from a number of different perspectives:

1) as ongoing interaction in a particular context,
2) retrospectively, given knowledge of short and long-term outcomes,
3) analytically, looking at signalling mechanisms at the level of prosodic cuing and discourse expectations.

It is of course premature to make sweeping statements about specific educational outcomes, based on our analysis of sharing time in one first grade classroom. However, we can now apply our interpretive perspective and methods of conversational analysis to test these hypotheses in a larger number of classrooms and at a variety of grade levels.

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Notes

Prosodic and paralinguistic cues are transcribed using a system developed by John Gumperz and his collaborators, based on the work of John Trim. In this system, speech sequences are first divided into tone groups or intonational phrases. A phrase can be marked by a minor, non-final boundary "/" or a major, or final, boundary "//". Within a tone group we indicate: 1) location of the nucleus (i.e., the sylable or syllables marked by a change in pitch) as "↘" low fall, "↓" high fall, "↗" low rise, "↑" high rise, "↗↘" rise-fall, etc.; 2) other accented sylables in the tone group, "'" high, "," low; 3 paralinguistic features such as a) shift to a high pitch register "˥" or shift to a low pitch register "˩" (both applying to the entire tone group), b) pausing ".." indicating a break in timing and "..." indicating a measurable pause, c) speech rate: "acc." indicating accelerating tempo and "dec." indicating decreasing tempo, d) loudness over an entire tone group is indicated "f" (loud) or "p" (soft). Doubling of one of the above symbols indicates extra emphasis.

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